



**Selected Papers of #AoIR2024:  
The 25th Annual Conference of the  
Association of Internet Researchers**  
Sheffield, UK / 30 Oct - 2 Nov 2024

## **MY PRODUCT, YOUR GREEN CHOICE: EXPLORING THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN INFLUENCER'S SUSTAINABILITY COMMUNICATION AND GREEN MARKETING STRATEGIES ON TIKTOK**

Mael Bombaci  
Lumsa University

Francesco Nespoli  
Lumsa University

### **Introduction**

In recent decades, the media have played a significant role in promoting and establishing the concept of sustainability in society (Newig et al., 2013). In today's world, companies have an increasing need to genuinely communicate their environmental commitment to gain consumer awareness and recognition of their credibility (Correia et al., 2023). TikTok, with its distinctive communicative style characterised by highly visual, vernacular, and meme-based content (Hautea et al., 2021), emerges as a particularly effective channel for addressing companies' communication needs, especially through the narratives shaped by green influencers. However, the actual willingness of these narratives to challenge the capitalist neoliberal logic has been questioned in the literature.

### **Theoretical framework**

Influencers, initially centred on commercial promotion (Colucci & Pedroni, 2022), have increasingly begun voicing their opinions on matters of social interest. This blurs the line between digital activism and influence culture. Green influencers are emerging, committed to raising public awareness of sustainability (Abell & Pittman, 2021). Their ability to promote behaviours (Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2022) is also evidenced by

Suggested Citation (APA): Bombaci, M., Nespoli F. (2024, October). My product, Your Green Choice: exploring the interplay between influencers' sustainability communication and green marketing strategies on TikTok. Paper presented at AoIR2024: The 25th Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Sheffield, UK: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

companies choosing to work with them as part of wider green marketing practices (Kan et al., 2024). Scientific research organisations have recently collaborated with influencers, leading some authors to highlight the pedagogical aspect of sustainability-focused content aimed at informing younger generations (Huber, 2022). Moreover, the utilisation of the modes of communication offered by TikTok, characterised by a highly visual, vernacular, and meme-based form (Zeng et al., 2021) do not necessarily result in a simplifications of the topics addressed; rather, they manifest the potential of the platform, according to Huber et al. (2022). However, the practices of green influencers also seem to be shaped by neoliberal logics, reflecting a paradoxical ideological tension as they seek both to oppose the market and to gain a role within it. This critique aligns with the claim that the green economy narrative itself can be seen as a continuation of neoliberal capitalism, where nature is privatised and commercialised (Cooke et al., 2022). This process maintains the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism under the guise of sustainable development and contributes to withdrawing attention from the social and political dimensions of sustainability (Wanner, 2014). In light of the increasing interest among TikTok users in environmental issues (TikTok Creative Center, 2022) and the potential offered by digital affordances (boyd, 2011; Davis, 2020) to shape the multifaceted outcome of user behaviour (Niedderer et al., 2016), it is crucial to recognize the importance of investing in sustainable communication through a mutually beneficial approach that considers the interests of all parties involved (Kumar et al., 2013). Therefore, this study aims to explore how companies combine sustainable communication and product sponsorship in collaborations with green influencers on TikTok.

## **Method**

The purpose of this paper is to provide an explanatory analysis of how companies communicate their environmental commitment. We ask: (Q1) Who are the main actors and what are the central themes used in this form of communication? (Q2) What are the recurring narratives in the collaboration between companies and green influencers to promote sustainability?

A content and thematic analysis was carried out, according to the framework adopted in the research by Basch et al. (2023) and Jones et al. (2023), on 45 videos published by green influencers on TikTok.

All selected content clearly indicates a paid collaboration, as signalled by the ad disclosure claim. The use of hashtags has facilitated the identification of content related to the topic. At the time of the study, February 2024, the most popular were #sustainability (374.1K posts), followed by #ecofriendly (579.5K posts) and #zerowaste (244.2K posts). To ensure a more comprehensive data set, we used two different VPNs, one based in the UK and the other in the US. After merging the datasets and removing duplicates, the first 15 videos for each hashtag were selected following the selection method originally adopted by Cheng and Zeng (2023). In particular, we selected the videos with the highest views. This effectively captures TikTok's virality dynamics

emphasised by Hautea et al. (2021). The focus was on an open and inductive thematic analysis of the narratives used to communicate the company's commitment to sustainability. Overall audiovisual content was also analysed in order to detect the use of memes and viral sounds.

### **Key findings**

The analysis shows a variety of companies in the field of consumer goods and services investing in green communication as a form of sponsorship on the platforms analysed. These include companies ranging from those marketing personal hygiene products (@newlifestyleabb and @ethiqueworld) and offering online services (@mirandamorey\_ and @uber) to e-commerce platforms focused on second-hand products (@brennan.kay x @backmarketusa). Preliminary results suggest that product sponsorship can be inserted into an educational narrative whose purpose is not only to promote the company but also to inform the user. The main trend is the use of a narrative that provides information on environmental issues in simple language, almost offering the product sponsored as a possible solution to the environmental problem posed. These findings are noteworthy as they demonstrate how company sponsorships are integrated into a broader narrative involving third-party actors. Presenting the product as a potential solution to environmental issues aligns the collaboration with the storytelling used by green influencers, resulting in content that is consistent with their feed profiles and may contribute to their credibility. However, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between green influencer's genuine environmental efforts and profit-driven motives. There are signs of a willingness to engage with consumer logics to correct and guide sustainable capitalism, evident in their promotion of reusable brands and advocacy of waste reduction but this approach does not challenge liberal norms; waste reduction is often seen as a minor issue within the broader context of ethical consumption. Furthermore, the lack of emphasis on collective action could limit the effectiveness of this form of advocacy. Sustainability issues are of intrinsic public interest and necessitate collective action. However, the observed behaviour from the analysis of the interaction with platform's affordances indicates that users' engagement remains predominantly at the individual level, indicating a reluctance to actively engage in public debate and to involve others on issues that require a broad societal response. TikTok and its video formats are therefore powerful tools for communicating. However, the articulation of messages related to corporate green goals requires a complex approach that takes into account the multiple dynamics based on the specific architecture of the platform.

### **Further questions**

This paper focuses on the content of selected videos, without taking into consideration the public response. It would be beneficial for future research to investigate user interaction with diverse content types, in order to understand how these strategies are seen by consumers and citizens. Which forms of engagement facilitated by platform

affordances are most frequently used by viewers? How do users react/comment on the sponsored content created by green influencers in collaboration with companies ?

## References

Abell, A., & Pittman, M. (2021). More Trust in Fewer Followers: Diverging Effects of Popularity Metrics and Green Orientation Social Media Influencers. *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 56(1), 70–82. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.intmar.2021.05.002>

Basch, C.H., Yalamanchili, B. & Fera, J. #Climate Change on TikTok: A Content Analysis of Videos. *J Community Health* 47, 163–167 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10900-021-01031-x>

boyd, d. (2010). Social Network Sites as Networked Publics: Affordances, Dynamics, and Implications. In *Networked Self: Identity, Community, and Culture on Social Network Sites* (Ed. Z. Papacharissi, pp. 39-58).

Chen, S. X., & Zeng, N. (2023). 'GASLIGHT, GATEKEEP, GIRLBOSS': MEMEFIED FEMININITIES AND DISIDENTIFICATION IN TIKTOK YOUTH CULTURES. *AoIR Selected Papers of Internet Research*, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.5210/spir.v2022i0.12988>

Colucci, M., & Pedroni, M. (2022). Got to be real: An investigation into the co-fabrication of authenticity by fashion companies and digital influencers. *Journal of Consumer Culture*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14695405211033665>

Correia, E., Sousa, S., Viseu, C., & Larginho, M. (2023). Analysing the Influence of Green Marketing Communication in Consumers' Green Purchase Behaviour. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 20(2), 1356. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20021356>

Cooke, P., Nunes, S., Oliva, S., & Lazzeretti, L. (2022). Open innovation, soft branding, and green influencers: Critiquing 'fast fashion' and 'overtourism.' *Journal of Open Innovation: Technology, Market, and Complexity*, 8(1), 52. <https://doi.org/10.3390/joitmc8010052>

Davis, J. L. (2020). *How Artifacts Afford: The Power and Politics of Everyday Things*. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/11967.001.0001>

Dekoninck, H., & Schmuck, D. (2022). The mobilizing power of influencers for pro-environmental behavior intentions and political participation. *Environmental Communication*, 16(4), 458–472. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2022.2027801>

Hautea, S., Parks, P., Takahashi, B., & Zeng, J. (2021). Showing They Care (Or Don't): Affective Publics and Ambivalent Climate Activism on TikTok. *Social Media & Society*, 7(2), 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211012344>

Huber, B., Lepenies, R., Baena, L. Q., & Allgaier, J. (2022). Beyond Individualized Responsibility Attributions? How Eco Influencers Communicate Sustainability on TikTok. *Environmental Communication*, 16(6), 713-722. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2022.2131868>

Jones, I.I. V., K. Sungwoo, T. Haoyang, & L. Zhiheng. (2024). Black People in Ukraine: A Content Analysis of TikTok Videos Documenting Discrimination Against Black People Attempting to Flee at the Onset of the 2022 Russo-Ukrainian War. *Dialogues in Health*, 4, 100161. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dialog.2023.100161>

Kan, J., Zheng, J., & Luo, S. (2024). Green Power of Virtual Influencer: The Role of Virtual Influencer Image, Emotional Appeal, and Product Involvement. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2023.103660>

Newig, J., Schulz, D., Fischer, D., Hetze, K., Laws, N., Lüdecke, G., & Rieckmann, M. (2013). Communication regarding sustainability: Conceptual perspectives and exploration of societal subsystems. *Sustainability*, 5(7), 2976–2990. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su5072976>

Niedderer, K., Ludden, G., Clune, S. J., Lockton, D., Mackrill, J., Morris, A., Cain, R., Gardiner, E., Evans, M., Gutteridge, R., & Hekkert, P. P. (2016). Design for behaviour change as a driver for sustainable innovation: Challenges and opportunities for implementation in the private and public sectors. *International Journal of Design*, 10(2), 67-85.

Kumar, V., Rahman, Z., Kazmi, A. A., & Goyal, P. (2013). Evolution of sustainability as a marketing strategy: Beginning of a new era. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 37, 482–489. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2012.03.313>

Wanner, T. (2014). The New 'Passive Revolution' of the Green Economy and Growth Discourse: Maintaining the 'Sustainable Development' of Neoliberal Capitalism. *New Political Economy*, 20(1), 21–41. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13563467.2013.866081>

Zeng, J., Schäfer, M. S., & Allgaier, J. (2021). Reposting “till Albert Einstein is TikTok famous”: The memetic construction of science on TikTok. *International Journal of Communication*, 3216–3247. <https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/8tdvm>

## Sitography

[https://ads.tiktok.com/business/creativecenter/quicktok/online/Go\\_Green\\_with\\_TikTok/pc/en](https://ads.tiktok.com/business/creativecenter/quicktok/online/Go_Green_with_TikTok/pc/en)

